

## HOW TO PUT OUR SCHOOLS ON THE ROAD TO RENEWAL

By George C. Roche

**Editor's Preview:** After a long decline spanning most of this century, punctuated by teachers inciting their classes to violence and seven last-place finishes for the U.S. in recent rankings of various countries' educational performance, America's schools finally seem ready to climb back toward literacy, character, and excellence.

George Roche, historian, president of Hillsdale College and the Shavano Institute, and an education adviser to the Reagan Administration, maps the road to renewal in this keynote address to a February 1985 seminar on the subject at Hillsdale. A dozen other education experts took part, including those identified with boldface in Dr. Roche's text.

He calls for fundamental curriculum reform to recover not only the 3 R's but the 3 M's, mystery, myth, and imagination, and to restore the moral dimension in American education. The grassroots movement for excellence must be sustained over the delaying tactics and excuses of an entrenched educationist profession, if real change is to occur.

Incentives for teachers and market competition among schools will be part of the answer, the author says. But he warns that voucher plans and tuition tax credits must not become a pretext for letting the camel's nose of government control into the tent of private K-12 education.

America first achieved greatness through the values of tradition, self-reliance, family, property, and competition, George Roche reminds us. The country at large is thriving thanks to their reassertion in the 1980s. Don't they belong back in the classroom as well?

Something has gone wrong, gone gravely wrong, with our children's education and their cause for hope.

In a book written not all that long ago, a humane scholar wrote, "Our civilization is going through a severe crisis.... Most people think that the crisis is due to the war but they are wrong. The war, with everything connected



to it, is only a phenomenon of the condition of uncivilization in which we find ourselves."

Despite what you might be tempted to believe, the war was not Vietnam. It was World War I, and the author was Dr. Albert Schweitzer. His remark is evidence that the alienation which grips our students, the uselessness which infests their curricula, and the lack of skills which may plague them forever, have taken decades to arrive.

**Raymond English**, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, offers this reminiscence of the Vietnam era:

One summer day in 1968 I was teaching a group of high school teachers, including a militant black woman from an inner-city school. She announced bluntly that she advised her students to break the law—to join in riots and looting—as a protest against the unjust society they lived in.

How will you feel, I asked, when some of your students are shot, and others get a lifelong prison record

as a result of your advice? She shrugged and remarked that it was not her responsibility.

At another session, another teacher (a white woman) told us that she refused to teach her students to respect property. You see, she said, I've no right to impose my values on anyone else. I asked her if everything in the classroom was nailed down.

These stories were anything but aberrations 20 years ago, yet today, you would find far fewer proponents of moral relativism, and fewer still for violence and theft.

Only a few years ago, the educational debate in this nation was whether testing was not, even in its mildest forms, racist and culturally unfair. Today, educators realize that such a debate is a luxury.

Twenty years ago, the proponents of traditional values could have held a national convention in a cedar closet. Today, not only do nearly all educators recognize the problem, but we recognize that the path to rectitude lies through teaching skills and values.

### Coming in Last

Nonetheless, the problems are frankly daunting. Seven times, in recent comparisons between American students and those from other industrialized nations, our youngsters finished in last place.

Among our minority youth, who need the skills for success more than any others, some 40 percent may be illiterate and hence condemned to a life without opportunity.

### About George C. Roche

George Roche became the eleventh president of Hillsdale College in 1971, establishing the Center for Constructive Alternatives and *Imprimis* the same year. Other elements of Hillsdale's national leadership outreach were put in place in the 1970s as Dr. Roche led the College's long fight for independence from federal control and in the 1980s with his founding of the Shavano Institute and the *Counterpoint* television series.

The Colorado native holds a B.A. degree from Regis College and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Colorado. He has been a Marine officer, a teacher in a country high school, a college professor, director of seminars at the Foundation for Economic Education, a Senate candidate and nationally known speaker, a widely published author and historian of liberty.

Since 1982 George Roche has held a President appointment as chairman of the National Council on Educational Research, a policy-setting body of the U.S. Department of Education.

In physics and chemistry, English and spelling, scores fall as the number and proportion of superior students decline.

If you have three hours to spend, ask a college professor what she thinks of today's freshmen, and you'll be lucky to escape after only three hours. She may tell you that two out of every five 17-year-olds cannot draw an inference from written material, only three in ten can write a persuasive essay, or that only three in ten can solve a math problem requiring several steps. She may also explain that this accounts for her gray hair.

You might talk to a recruiting officer in any one of America's companies. Students who can't write persuasive essays find themselves unwelcome in marketing or advertising divisions. Those who can't calculate find no home in sales or accounting. Those who can't draw inferences from written materials can be offered little hope except 40 years of lifting heavy boxes.

Today, we find no shortage of sorry statistics and, thankfully, no shortage of agreement, but even so we must not let ourselves be misled by numbers. The problem is not teaching 10 million youngsters the handful of rules for expository writing, nor merely the simple steps of algebra. Today's problems go back to the root of our curriculum.

J. Allen Smith, patron saint of the 20th century's intellectual climate and precursor to theorists like Charles Beard, wrote, "The trouble with us reformers is that we've made reform a crusade against all standards. Well, we've smashed them all, and now neither we nor anybody else have anything left."

### Three R's and Three M's

As grim as his analysis sounds, he forgot one option. We can include again, in our schools, some of the crucial values and insights of Western civilization. We can go back and retrieve a few of the babies thrown out with yesterday's bath water.

Yes, we have garbage curricula in our high schools and colleges—classes in making pesto sauce for kids who have never read *Macbeth*, classes in astrology for kids who don't know an inclined plane from a quadratic equation. But we have yet to face the fact that the garbage starts on day one.

Diane Ravitch, professor of history and education at the Teachers College of Columbia University, asks, "How can our children be motivated to read if what they are reading is not worth the time it takes to decipher? Did anyone ever love a basal reader? Did anyone ever take a flashlight to bed to read a basal reader under the covers?"

Her question leads her to the answer J. Allen Smith did not consider:

It is certainly true that history cannot be taught in elementary schools as it is taught in junior high or high



school, but young people are fascinated and challenged by the incredible but true stories of human history.... History provides the framework within which the elementary teacher can use myths, legends and fairy tales. Why shouldn't children read the fabulous Greek myths while learning about Greek history, culture and society? Education is debased when the curriculum is stripped of its content and when skills, free of any cultural, literary or historical context, are all that is taught.

No wonder research shows that elementary schools are not the problem. On standardized tests of skills, the students are apparently doing fine. It is only later that their teachers report how they falter when it comes to making inferences or deductions. But it is not only higher-order skills that they lack. They are culturally illiterate. They can read the words put in front of them, but they have no "furniture" in their minds, no vocabulary of historical persons or events, no reference to ordinary literary images that fifth graders once imbibed in every common school in the nation.

Like Mr. English's acquaintance, who refused to impose her values on anyone else, today's curriculum offers no judgment or direction with only a shallow relevance. If people ran restaurants as they run schools, there would be no more chefs and menus. We would be led to the kitchen and left to fend for ourselves among the ingredients. It would not be surprising to find some poor souls, unable to cook, eating oregano out of the bottle or gnawing on a raw potato.

The "3 R's," reading, writing and arithmetic, don't all start with "r" so I don't mind advocating a return to the "3 M's," mystery, myth and imagination, the basis for literature and the transmission of truth so well explained by Burke and Coleridge, and understood by everyone from Homer to C. S. Lewis.

Perhaps the trouble with some educators is that they spend too much time with teachers and too little time with children. Your average American 7-year-old, boy or girl, is not particularly interested in Dick or Jane or Spot unless one of them gets blasted by a UFO. On their own time, they revel in Conan the Barbarian, so how about Ulysses and the Cyclops, or Jason and the Argonauts?

The reason these far more interesting tales were banished, years ago, is that they were judgmental and moral, not morally relativistic.

Teachers, fearful of propagandizing their students, stopped giving them any focal point from which to view the world. Without perspective they could no longer choose between openness and bigotry, between the United States and the Soviet Union, between sense and nonsense, any more than a person stripped of taste buds could differentiate between Perrier and paraquat.

### Values Rediscovered

The modern crusade against relativism is anything but partisan. Pick up a paper and read conservative scholars like **Annette Kirk** of the President's Commission on Ex-

cellence in Education. Or read Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, saying essentially the same thing.

"The pendulum has swung too far," Mr. Shanker wrote recently. "Absolutism distorts reality, but so does the kind of relativism by which we train kids to make no value judgments at all ... indeed, to have no values."

This is not an issue of religious rights or the right to freedom from imposed religion. The fact that it is wrong to steal or murder, the fact that it is right to respect your parents and be polite to those you meet, are properties of all religions and simple mainstays of our civilization. A return to moral education need not be partisan any more than our pluralistic society is partisan.

Last year, the State of Maryland published a report, four years in the making, from the Governor's Commission on Values Education, a name and a concept unthinkable only a decade before.

The Commission noted that one-third of all American families are touched by crime in a given year, that crime and delinquency cost us \$125 billion annually. They cited a Gallup poll in which parents named discipline as one of their greatest concerns for public schools. They pointed out that our most damaging social problems—corruption, delinquency, alcoholism and drug abuse, domestic instability and violence—"make imperative the teaching of character and citizenship values."

Starting with a list of values—integrity and duty, compassion and respect for property, discipline and the courage of convictions, patriotism and civic education—the Commission went to work. In 1983 they published their findings.

- "Most of the recommendations," they wrote, "require action at the local level rather than relying on directives of the state."

- School boards, they discovered, could provide new incentives for teachers, and strengthen discipline by codifying rights and responsibilities. For school administrators, they found that strong leadership makes strong schools. They recommended that some should be rewarded, others educated, and some removed or transferred from leadership roles.

- Teachers, said the Commission, need greater support. They need rewards for excellence, and they need to be supported when they face physical or legal threats.

- Guidance counselors also need more direct exposure to the students, but parents are perhaps most important of all. The Commission encouraged parental involvement at all levels, and suggested drafting a code of parental responsibilities and rights.

- Finally, the Commission made recommendations for a new curriculum. "First and foremost, schools must have strong programs in history, government, literature and the arts." Textbooks must include "the richness of

the humanities." Students should learn teamwork through extra-curricular activities, study the world's religions, be familiar with current affairs and civic responsibilities.

### **Will the Profession Swallow the Reformers?**

Across America, from states like Maryland down to our smallest villages, we are beginning to question our curriculum and rebuild toward a better vision.

Chester Finn, professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt, describes the drive for educational excellence as a grassroots movement, a movement unbound by prejudice or doctrine. The proponents are willing to try almost anything that shows promise of success. He writes:

Because the educational forest was so dry and the winds were already blowing in the right direction sparks ignited a reform blaze that spread like wildfire. But professional educators are wary, suspicious and a bit resentful. The excellence movement was not their idea ... if the education profession turns its wariness and jealousy into massive resistance, the excellence movement will not achieve much. In time, the commissions will stop reporting, the newspapers will stop watching closely, the governors and legislators will turn to prison reform or groundwater supplies, and the business leaders will return to their companies.

Real educational change, Finn warns, remains at the mercy of the professionals, a situation that should give us pause. Consigning cheerleading and drivers' education to after-school hours invites feuds that are anathema to the manager. Suggesting new proposals which might fail is equally distasteful. Managers, habitually loath to step in and suggest curricula, are especially reticent in the humanities.

There are other bugaboos. Educational professionals fear that increased excellence means decreased equality.

But if that were true, now could we account for the fact that in the State of Michigan, year after year, top educational awards are won by the school on Beaver Island, a desolate little place stuck in the middle of Lake Michigan. Some big schools spill more at lunch than this school spends in a semester, yet their students are the top choices at the best colleges in the state. The secret is not money or financial equality, for nobody on Beaver Island is rich. The secret is a traditional curriculum, an interested and active faculty, and effective discipline.

My own education began in a one-room Colorado schoolhouse. I now head a small and vigorously independent college in Michigan. Neither Gas Creek School nor Hillsdale College could ever be accused of being rich, but both have afforded quality education and the opportunity for excellence. A very genuine equality of opportunity is often most strongly present when real standards are enforced.

Chester Finn also debunks a favorite excuse of school administrators that he wryly calls the "Gee, Officer

Krupke" alibi:

"Schools are powerless," goes the argument. "Gee, there's nuclear war, divorce, drug abuse and close dancing going on out there; what can we do?" The woeful situation allegedly deflects work and responsibility. However, while nobody believes that schoolteachers are the cause of the world's problems, there is nothing outlandish in expecting educators to educate. Whether we suffer from teacher failure or a misguided system, it is fair to expect the help of teachers and administrators in correcting the situation.

### **Incentives for Teacher Excellence**

In rallying educators and administrators behind the banner of excellence, most of the problems are bureaucratic, and my use of the word contains no critical undertones. Indeed, the same administrative factors are at play in educational management as in government or any of our larger corporations. The solution, however, lies in the magic word "incentives."

If you don't mind, I'll take a brief moment to rail about hypocrisy. I believe it fair to say that most Americans cherish our free-enterprise system. As economists and everyone else worry about foreign competition, "incentives" are frequently advanced as a solution. Tax cuts boost incentives and provide jobs. Productivity pay boosts output on the assembly lines. From our richest to our poorest, we're happy to tell people to compete. But we've forgotten incentives for one of the most important groups of all—the teachers who must train our young to believe in competition, excellence and, yes, incentives.

Right now, we treat good teachers exactly the same as bad teachers. Is it any wonder that some get discouraged while others never try?

The good ones deserve formal recognition, applause from students, parents and peers, and, for lack of a better word, cash.

Schools need career ladders of the sort most colleges already have, with increasing pay, increasing responsibility, and most important, increasing respect. This is the particular genius of the Master Teacher program, passed into law by the State of Tennessee under the direction of Governor Lamar Alexander.

Some have complained that this system does little but reward a few. That's a mistaken notion. We must view education as a dynamic rather than a static process. As there can be no finite limits to excellence, there can be no finite limit to awards. Once teachers realize that their hard work will be rewarded, expect to find more and more hard-working teachers and more and more excellence.

As teaching becomes more lucrative, as well as more appreciated, count on more of our brightest young people choosing teaching as their profession.



Any successful businessman can tell you that any problem can be overcome with the right incentive. Ten years from now, expect any school administrator to tell you that the problems of school management, the problems in selling excellence to a bureaucracy, were overcome in the same way: by incentives.

### Political Monopoly or Market Competition?

There is one more educational problem I have yet to mention: politics.

Politics rears its ugly head at several points in the educational debate. We all know there is no shortage of propaganda in America. All we have to do is switch on the television to see someone selling some ideology or another. The problem comes when such stuff is peddled in the classroom.

The nuclear freeze movement, for example, has given us the spectacle of a large number of teachers inculcating fear and using that fear to direct the political attitudes of their students. President Reagan received baskets of letters from grade schoolers, imploring him not to blow up the world.

Parenthetically, one such letter, from a small boy, said he supported the President anyway, but was only writing the letter because his teacher told him he had to.

While some good can be done by administrators and active parents, commitment cannot always work. Whether for political or religious reasons, or simply as a matter of taste in curriculum, there has to be another option, provided by free enterprise.

We are seeing that competition and incentive build better teachers, so it follows that they also build better schools. Today, millions of students receive private educations, whether for children especially talented or disabled, for religious preference, or simply for something different and often better than is thought to be available at the government school up the road.

The role of private schools as a significant part of our educational structure raises the question of vouchers. Here I must bring up the name of Albert Shanker again. Unfortunately, the president of the American Federation of Teachers is not as enlightened on vouchers as he is on returning to values. "The greater the free choice granted by a voucher plan," he has predicted, "the more will the educational interests of the poor, black, and difficult children suffer."

Now this is a worthy concern, but the reasoning is backward. **John McLaughry**, a former Reagan White House aide, puts it more accurately in a *Reason* magazine article, pointing out that under the present quasi-monopoly it is precisely those disadvantaged children who "are ordinarily the ones with the least possibility of affording private alternatives to inferior government schools."

Vouchers would begin to change that, Mr. McLaughry

notes, and he cites a major public opinion poll in 1983 that showed a majority of Americans anxious to try vouchers. "Most politicians," he says, "remain skittish."

They also remain skittish on tuition tax credits, removing private school parents from double jeopardy—paying tuition once in taxes and again in tuition payments. Critics charge that tax credits would strip assets from inferior schools, but would they? A \$500 tax credit means one less student in school, and one less for the school board to educate. The remainder of his tax money still goes to the government school. If anything, it would enrich the poorer schools.

Critics also complain that both vouchers and credits would take the bright children out of the state-run classrooms. But one can easily make the argument that only something that important will stir parents to action, demanding increased quality from their government schools.

Let me add this strong word of caution, however. Both of these proposed reforms—tax credits for the tuition a parent would pay to a private school, and choice-widening vouchers that a parent could spend at public and private schools alike—are schemes for channeling government funds into the private sector of American elementary and secondary education. Anyone who doubts that government control would accompany those government dollars has missed the point of the long, sad story of public encroachment upon private *higher* education in our country during the past two decades. It is a story that we at Hillsdale know all too well, and it has become even more dangerous with the "once a tax dollar, always a tax dollar" doctrine of indirect aid handed down by the Supreme Court in last year's *Grove City* case and now possibly headed for the statute books under several bills pending in Congress.

So while we should welcome the voucher and tuition tax credit debate as a way of focusing attention on the need for freer choice and a more open market in K-12 education, we should be extremely wary of letting the camel of state control use this device to get its nose into the tent of our independent, non-government schools.

### The Road to Renewal

It is striking, when we step back and look at the country as a whole, to realize that what we find as trouble in the schools is what we have found as trouble in much of America.

Our economy, staggering under brutal taxes and regulatory mismanagement, has suffered from the same lack of incentives our teachers suffer from today.

Our society, plagued with rootlessness and self-doubt, turned from a more traditional America and lost its belief in excellence because we lost our ability to judge excellence. Today, we are beginning to recover as our country grows again more sure of itself, more wisely patriotic and more strong. Meanwhile our schools wander on, lost

in the same woods most of our nation is now leaving.

As consumers, as producers, we have come again to know the fruits of competition, but we are unprepared to face genuine competition in our schools.

In caring for our needy, we have come to realize that freewheeling giveaways do not work, and that assistance must be coupled with training for self-reliance. Yet time and time again, we hear the cry that educational reforms, educational management, and educational spending must come from Washington.

In our discussion of reform in our schools we have neglected our first lesson, the lesson of life in America.

We will not return to literacy or excellence until we apply those immutable rules of life to the classroom. The values of tradition, of property and of family which, by common accord, made America prosper can again make our schools seats of learning and not mere way stations between childhood and unemployment.

We have tried all the instant powders, drugs and quack cures before. We've tried massive injections of tax dollars, raids on private institutions, regulations and

rhetoric. It is time to try something we haven't tried before—excellence.

If we can afford excellent incentives for our industries, we can afford them for our schools. If we can afford excellent freedom for our consumers, we can afford that same freedom for parents and students choosing a school. If we can afford to return to common values in the country at large, then we cannot live without those values in the classroom. And we can't afford to wait much longer.

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*Further reading on education reform from the Hillsdale College Press: George Roche's books Education in America, The Balancing Act: Quota Hiring in Higher Education, and America by the Throat: The Stranglehold of Federal Bureaucracy; the Essential Imprimis anthology entitled Rescuing American Education, with essays by Roche and ten other authors; and videocassettes or transcript of "The Federal Role in Quality Education," a debate in the PBS-TV Counterpoint series featuring Roche, current Education Secretary William Bennett, and Carter's Education Secretary, Shirley Hufstедler. To order, write or call the Hillsdale College Press, Hillsdale, MI 49242, (517) 437-7341.*



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